

Environmentalists worry about safety, pollution as Twelve Mile River cuts new path

Company denies safety fears by conservation groups

By Anna Simon • Clemson Bureau • Published:
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There are growing worries that the unleashed Twelve Mile River is collapsing floodplains as powerful waters cut a new path through some of the most beautiful land of the Upstate, releasing a new wave of pollutants.

If it's happening, it could threaten anew Lake Hartwell and public safety. Three Upstate conservation groups believe it is, while the company responsible for restoring and cleaning the river said it's not.

A dam on the Twelve Mile was demolished as part of a plan to cleanse PCB-contaminated waters that flow into Hartwell. It's a grand design to dilute and cover PCBs released into the waters more than three decades ago by the former Sangamo-Weston plant — contamination that has led to health warnings about eating fish from the sprawling lake that persist to this day.

An environmental science and engineering firm working with the conservation groups has issued a notification of imminent threat to public safety related to undermining of the floodplains from dredging on the Twelve Mile.

"While we are delighted that this project opens up the beauty and many of the natural characteristics of Twelve Mile River, we are very concerned that in the haste to complete the project, public safety issues are not being addressed," said Larry Dyck, a river restoration expert who lives on the river and is affiliated with the three organizations.

Stephen Harris of Schlumberger Technology Corp. said there's no danger to the public. The company owns the former Sangamo-Weston operation and is responsible for the dam removal and river restoration.

"To be clear, neither the restoration activities nor the natural adjustment of the creek present safety concerns to the community," Harris said. "As always, property owners with land adjacent to the river are encouraged to practice usual due caution while accessing the creek and walking along the river bank."

A letter from Upstate Forever, the Pickens County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Lake Hartwell Association asks trustees in a court-ordered settlement to clean the waters and the Environmental Protection Agency to require Schlumberger to remove and properly dispose of the floodplain sediments before another dam, Woodside II, is removed.

"We have grave concerns about both the physical and chemical conditions of the floodplain sediments, said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever. "Those sediments need to be dredged and removed from the river and properly disposed of before the Woodside II dam is removed. Right now, that dam is the only thing keeping them out of Lake Hartwell."

The letter sent to trustees, the EPA and Pickens County included the notice of imminent threat to public safety from Kestrel Horizons LLC.

The action comes after U.S. District Judge G. Ross Anderson Jr. recently denied a request from Upstate Forever and the others for a hearing and referred them to settlement trustees. Anderson, who ordered the dam removal and river restoration in a 2006 natural resource damage settlement, said he has no

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further comment at this time.

The conservationists contend that sandy floodplain banks not removed by dredging before the Woodside I dam was demolished are unstable and could collapse, posing a danger for property owners walking along the river bank and for river users as large trees collapse into the water.

The groups warn that PCBs once trapped in the floodplains are migrating toward Lake Hartwell as the river cuts a new path where Woodside I held an impoundment 27 feet above the river bed.

The Kestrel document states, "any person standing on the floodplains along the Woodside I and Woodside II impoundments (State 137 bridge to Woodside II Dam) is at imminent risk of injury or death due to the instability of the floodplain terraces caused by the Schlumberger dredging. No security fencing or warning signs have been erected, and the banks are collapsing such that large trees have now tumbled into the river. This situation could quickly transition from nuisance to tragedy."

Bill Stephens, a managing principal at Kestrel, said he had no comment beyond the document.

Harris said it was anticipated that as the river finds its natural course, the banks upstream of the former Woodside I dam "may continue to adjust themselves over time, especially following heavy rainfall and creek flow."

Schlumberger is monitoring the creek and the newly exposed banks and working with trustees "on appropriate restoration activities," Harris said.

Dredging activity continues upstream of the Woodside II dam and is expected to be completed by late summer. Then demolition will begin on Woodside II, Harris said.

Craig Zeller, an EPA project manager, said the federal agency has no plans at this time to step in.

The EPA has limited authority regarding the restoration settlement, with the exception of how it would potentially affect the clean up of PCBs in Lake Hartwell, Zeller said.

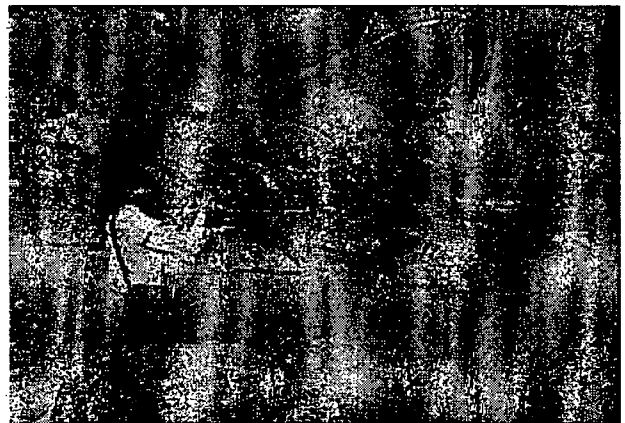
The Twelve Mile River "is dynamic and changing, which was expected, and will evolve itself into a stable channel," Zeller said. "The plan has been to let this channel evolve on its own, and through a

system of periodic inspections, identify sections of bank that may be unstable in the long term and might need a little help."

Natural vegetation would be planted on those sections to add stability, he said.

Ross Self, chairman of the settlement trustee council, said trustees are reviewing a draft response to Upstate Forever related to their letter and Kestrel's report. "It would be inappropriate for me to comment on that response until it has been approved by the council," Self said.

Pickens County Administrator Chap Hurst said County Council had engineers take additional samples from the floodplain areas to better determine the extent of the problem. Samples were taken several weeks ago, and results aren't in yet, Hurst said.



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Larry Dyck takes photos of the Twelve Mile River where recent rains have caused the river banks to erode and trees fell into the river. (PATRICK COLLARD/Staff)

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